Eliminating human error:

How media agencies can avoid costly mistakes & overspend

Foreword

Errors have the **potential to be catastrophic** for both media agencies and their brand clients. Whether those errors come in the form of overspending or underspending, a wrongly tagged or targeted campaign, or incorrect brand safety and suitability settings being applied, there is plenty of room for mistakes.

For media agencies, campaigns of **any size** could fall victim to a mistake and potentially wipe out their often razor-thin margins. Brands, of course, want to make sure that they get what they're paying for and don't want to see that their campaigns fail because of issues around reach or brand safety.

However, human error is **inevitable**, particularly when performing seemingly menial tasks. A search of Reddit and you'll find a number of stories of people who have managed to make a mistake, showing just how easy it can be to have a media buying accident.

But how big is the problem facing the industry in reality and how are these errors being prevented?

In this report, we've spoken to media buying experts to find out how big of a challenge human error is across the industry and explore the measures that should be in place to **minimise** the chances of an error being made.

Pierre-Lou Dominjon,
Co-founder & CEO, Grasp

Jessica Michen,
Co-founder & COO, Grasp

Grasp is the global adtech leader in operational excellence in digital media buying, across Social, Search and Programmatic.

Its QA suite offers a unique preventive approach that allows media agencies and brand advertisers to **prevent overspend** and **human errors** in campaign setup processes.

The role of media agencies

Before diving into the issue of human error in media buying, it's important to take a step back and look at how media agencies work to execute their clients' campaigns, and where within this there may be room for errors to crop up.

Simon Akers, Founder of independent marketing consultancy Archmon, refers to agencies as being the "air traffic control of the media channel airport" in the way they help to standardise measurement and clarify the impact of campaigns. A role that could be played by clients, but "they are often bereft of certain industry insights that agencies have."

Boiling that down, an agency's "main objective is to be given a certain brief, a certain amount of money from the client, and to figure out how best to spend that – whether that's across non-digital or within digital channels. They've got to figure out what the right audience is and then set the right outcomes that they're going to achieve as a result of that campaign," says Joseph Pamboris, Solutions Lead & Founder at Alligator Solutions, an advertising and marketing technology solutions business.

"[Agencies are] the air traffic control of the media channel airport."

**Simon Akers,
Founder of independent marketing
consultancy Archmon**

"They always start with, 'here's the budget. What's the brief? How do we plan the right ways to target and find these people aligned with the creative and creative message which is going to be produced for the campaign?'"

Deborah Gbadamosi, Global Client Lead at Mindshare, expands on this: "We've got a really pivotal role when it comes to looking after clients' media spend. We have to make sure we're optimising it. We've got to make sure that we're leveraging things like data to drive our strategies to give a better understanding of our audiences.

"Once we've done that, it's about aligning our media investment and our target audiences, the preferences, personalisation. It means we can provide better performance across channels, and a lot of that is linked to dashboarding and gathering campaign data, and being able to look at that across channels."

What's more, an agency's ability to serve clients has only been enhanced with the continued growth of digital, and the number of avenues through which audiences can now be reached across channels. And that's where Guillermo Dvorak, Managing Partner – Digital and Data at Total Media, is really seeing the benefits being reaped.

"Everything becoming more digital is definitely helping, because now we can be more targeted, more specialised," says Dvorak. "We can tell the client exactly what was served, when, against what. We can optimise to that.

"If you look at something like linear TV, it was more of a suggestion that you can tell the sales houses before. But we can actually optimise, not just to genre, but also the time of day and specific shows in that category."

"Everything becoming more digital is definitely helping, because now we can be more targeted, more specialised."

Guillermo Dvorak, Managing Partner – Digital and Data at Total Media

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I'm only human after all

As everything has become more digital, or programmatised, it's made getting ads out into the world far easier. Self-service platforms mean it's often just a case of inputting a few numbers, checking a few boxes, uploading your creative, and away you go.

The ease of the process, and its menial nature, means there is **significant room for error**. Something as simple as accidentally adding an extra zero to the budget or selecting the wrong location to target could have a **detrimental effect** for both an agency and its client.

"Overspending is an absolute killer," according to Dvorak. "If any agency mishandles a budget by overspending or underspending based on forecasts, you either have to pull from your pocket whatever was overspent or you have to justify why you were underspending to the client.

"If you reach a point in the conversation where the client isn't aware or informed, then something is broken in that conversation, because it should never be a surprise. It's one of the worst ways that you can lose money."

Simon Halstead, Founder of Halstead Incubation Partners, adds: "We've moved to a world where so many more things are tool-based. When I used to buy TV, I used to have to fill out an order and fax it over to the TV station to get airtime. Now, that had a number of failsafes and it had a number of checks. I would write it out, I would check it against my plan, I would have somebody else check it, the agency would look at it from the overall investment level and check that it was within the boundaries.

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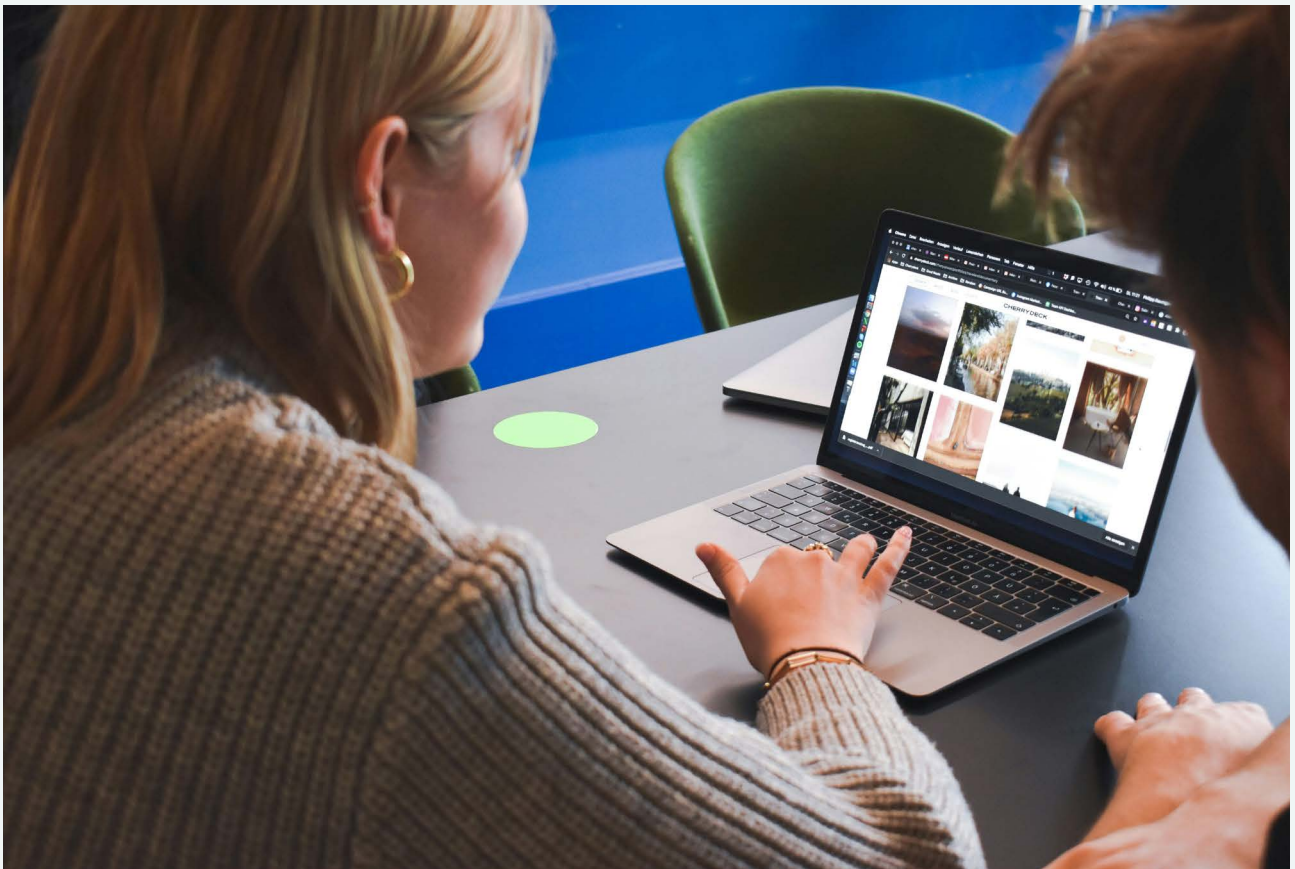
"You wouldn't see any egregious accidents, whereas it's really easy to misplace a zero when you're typing in a campaign budget or assigning spend to a channel."

Nobody is immune to making a mistake, as Charles Crotty, Managing Partner at Digitas UK, puts it, "the fact is humans are humans, and humans make mistakes."

The key for an agency is to learn from its mistakes and put the measures in place to ensure those mistakes don't happen again – or it could end up being **incredibly costly** to the business in the long run.

"A lot of people have learned by making mistakes, quite frankly. Mistakes are inevitable. I used to say, 'if you're not making mistakes, you're not doing enough.' It's easy not to make mistakes when you're sitting there doing absolutely nothing." states Ben Foster, Chief Digital Officer at The Kite Factory. "When it does go wrong, how do you stop it from happening again? What checks and balances are in place?"

"If you don't have the right checks and balances to stop making those mistakes, then you're not doing it right."

**Charles Crotty,
Managing Partner at Digitas UK**

> *"It's risky having someone with two years' experience managing hundreds of thousands of pounds of budget."*
>
> **Joseph Pamboris, Solutions Lead & Founder at Alligator Solutions**

Crotty adds: "Over the years, so much work, ops, and tools have been put into managing this, so it really shouldn't be an issue across the industry anymore. If you don't have the right checks and balances to stop making those mistakes, then you're not doing it right."

While human errors shouldn't be taking place with all the measures in place, it remains "**a big problem**," according to Pamboris.

"The issue is often something that the clients don't see, because the agency will often absorb it. It could be as simple as putting the total budget in a daily budget field.

"It's mostly because we have relatively junior people doing activation, and there's often the need to have people checking someone else's work because of that. It's risky having someone with two years' experience managing hundreds of thousands of pounds of budget." Pamboris continues.

"It's probably not well addressed, because often the agency has to either try to get some credit back from the platform or the publishers, or they'll just have to take it on the chin and accept that they're going to have to pay for the mistake they've made. And, if it's an inefficiency other than overspending, it might be swept under the carpet."

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The damage is done

Once an error has been made, there is little that can be done to prevent it from causing harm to the agency – whether that comes in the form of financial damage or reputational damage.

"If you overspend – whether that's overspend versus total budget, or you spend an amount of money that should've been spent over a long period in just a few days – the reality is that the client is not going to be willing to swallow that and pay for it," explains Foster.

"The second one is the damage that causes to the relationship with the client. You've got to have a conversation with them and make them aware of it, which can impact trust in the agency."

With that, "it's also important to note these overspends are not always the big, significant overspends that people tend to talk about," according to Nick Runciman, Head of Programmatic Operations at MG OMD. "Sometimes it can just be smaller errors that can arise through things like over-deliveries on technology fees or similar."

A costly problem

Overspend is estimated to cost the industry $23 billion each year, representing 4.5% of digital ad spend.

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This has a knock-on effect elsewhere within an agency as well, because "you cannot do all the creative stuff – you cannot do all the stuff that wins awards – without executional excellence," according to Foster.

Avoiding these errors also creates an environment where "all media is working media. It means all money is going to campaign goals," Halstead adds. Moreover, it means that efficiency is improved for all parties involved in the media buying process.

"It's difficult, after the fact, particularly in programmatic advertising, to go back and amend what's been spent," Halstead continues. "It's quite challenging to go do that work. So, it becomes a lot of time and effort and negotiation on the players involved to do. It can **really improve your efficiency just by avoiding overspend** and having less invoice payment issues and being much more efficient through the line for everyone involved in it – be that the SSP, DSP, or publisher to the agency at the other end."

One of the factors that isn't often considered when thinking about the damage caused by media buying errors is the impact that has on the person and/or team that made the mistake.

"Nobody wants to work somewhere where things are constantly going wrong. People want to be given the framework to be able to succeed. And if they're working at a business which is not doing its job in terms of how campaigns are set up, not only is it annoying the clients, people aren't going to enjoy working there for very long," says Crotty.

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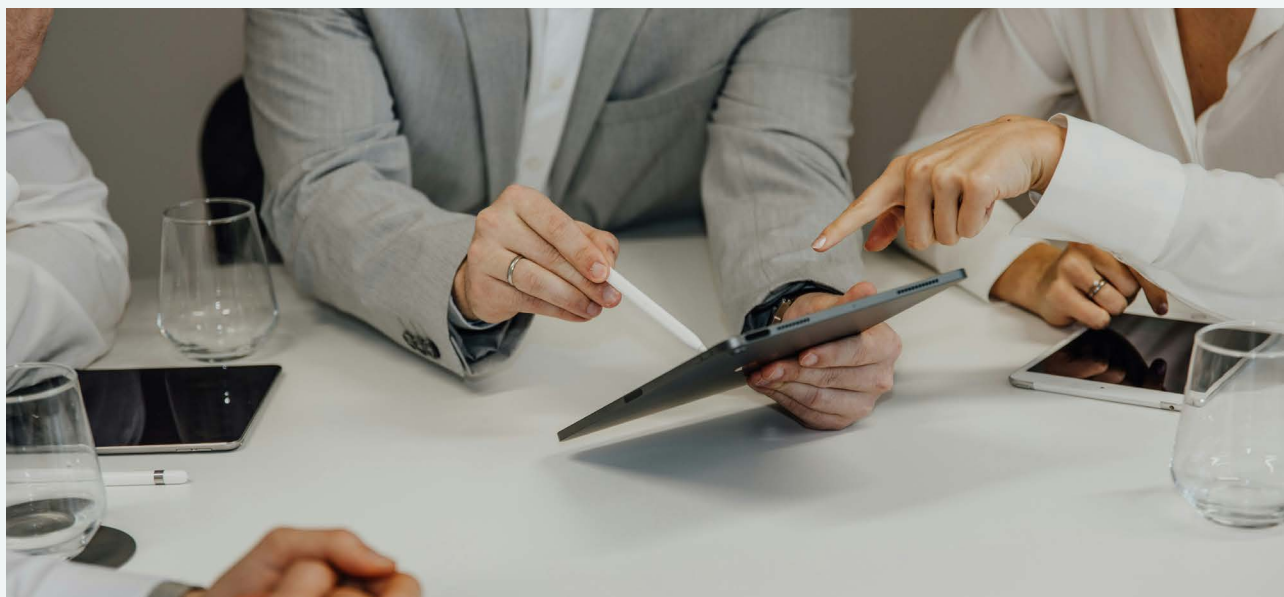
"Everybody has made a mistake in their career, and everybody knows what that feels like, and it's not a nice feeling. If you feel you're not supported in avoiding that feeling, because they don't have the right set up, and it happens over and over again, you're not going to have a terribly happy campaign executable workforce."

Archmon's Akers expands on this with a very important message that the whole industry should take heed of: "The mental wellbeing of your agency and vendor staff is critical. It's often a digital job, and a stitch in time really does save nine.

"What sounds better? The one account manager doing it all on their own, rushing through, and making knock-on errors? Or the account manager who has more time with support and sense checks to, ultimately, not make errors? The latter is happier.

"We're so used to burning people out. What if we take the edge off that person, give them an extra hour? They're going to feel happier long-term, because the unintended consequence of speed and rush is mistakes, and then the knock-on effects of misery and mental health problems. "Let's focus on things we can control, which is people. We're a good industry with good people. Let's look after each other more."

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A step in the right direction

In order to overcome any potential damage that could be caused by errors, agencies need to ensure they have the **right processes and tools** in place. Preventing the mistake from happening in the first place is the only way to deliver success for both the agency and the client.

Avoiding mistakes means **big cost savings**, but also ensures a **stronger brand reputation** for clients, suggests Mindshare's Gbadamosi.

"Their consumers will trust them more and then there's absolutely more opportunity to invest in future campaigns, because you know what's going to work and what's not going to work, and you've mitigated some of those errors," she says.

"There's a big area around remaining agile and creating agility within your business, so that you can bring in new talent as and where you need. You can bring in new technologies as and when you need. You can adapt to market changes and market forces, and that won't impact media efficiency. Ultimately, it's about reducing the errors that will create a stable foundation so that you can actually grow and perform stronger over time."

As we've already highlighted, mistakes are very likely when people are being made to perform menial, unfulfilling tasks. "Human beings are not the best at repetitive tasks. Your mind starts to go away to other things while you repeat the motions," according to Dvorak.

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To tackle this, Total Media has implemented elements of automation and AI, alongside ensuring that a line manager has to review any campaign inputs submitted by a junior member of staff, and regularly training every person within the agency – whatever level they're at.

Alligator's Pamboris agrees with having these measures in place, highlighting the importance of "good training and development for team members," "having someone checking someone else's work," and "the use of technology to help protect against those mistakes."

However, he acknowledges that there is a problem, particularly when it comes to double-checking someone's work, because "it does mean additional full-time employees, and that can have a knock-on effect as a cost for the client as well. And, for most people, checking other people's work isn't the most rewarding of jobs."

Thankfully, there are tools on the market which work to prevent human input from ever having the chance of causing a catastrophic error.

Grasp, owned by programmatic media partner MiQ, is the **industry's only preventive solution**. It works to prevent overspend by taking an approach to digital media buying compliance that ensures a rigorous QA process and assurances around taxonomies and brand safety measures. This means removing the need to have to "learn from your mistakes."

But there's an effective solution

Within only four years of going live, Grasp works with all six global holding agency groups and is rapidly growing its number of independent agency clients.

Grasp has managed to reduce overspend by 99% for its clients by preventing the possibility of errors ever happening in the first place.

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"We leverage our Omni-governance tool via Grasp, which spots any potential errors even before our detailed, manual QA process," says MG OMD's Runciman. "Grasp is a really powerful tool. It allows us to set guidelines or rules for all digital platforms, and it prevents the users from even creating or saving campaigns if they don't adhere to those preset guidelines. We have those guidelines set up for budgets, targeting settings, naming conventions, taxonomy, and more, to ensure campaigns are set up in the most accurate and effective way."

It's clear that there's an issue that needs to be addressed within media buying, but it's a problem that is often underestimated until an error actually occurs. Rather than waiting for an error to strike, agencies and brands should be proactive and ensure there isn't a chance for an issue to occur in the first place.

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There is no market or region where this should be more or less of a concern. It's a global challenge that's being faced, and it's happening across social, search, and programmatic.

There are some mistakes that can't be fixed without implementing the right tools – no matter how many processes you put in place, humans always have a mistake in them. And these tools should be the ones that prevent humans from ever being able to make those mistakes.

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